

America Has Turned to Toy Making



(C) Press Ill. Service

They are mostly made in America now.

"THE Japanese are sending us a great quantity of cheap, small playthings, but the bulk of the real toys come from Germany. If the German toy-factories should close down the Christmas trees of this country would be bare."

That remark was made by a buyer for a big Western toy-shop ten days before Christmas in the year 1913—six years ago. That is, you observe, the last Christmas before the war. The following Christmas the German toy-factories were closed down, or as good as closed down, since their products could not reach this country. Of course the German toys were still on the markets, since there were tons of advance shipments already in this country waiting for distribution. Toy-buying is done in the spring and summer of each year.

But the significance is not in the stores of German toys that "lasted out" for eighteen months after war had been declared by the European Allies, but in the utter disapproval of the buyer's prediction.

The German toy-factories were closed; the Christmas trees of the United States were not bare, have never been bare, and will not be bare this Christmas.

Looking back to that Christmas season of 1913, and the talk with the Western buyer, it is easy to recall the self-complacency with which he glanced over his store, justifying his seven-months-old judgment of the previous spring and pointing out that his stock, purchased so long in advance, was thinning down almost exactly in response to the normal demand. It is an interesting study, this of the child-taste in toys, and if you want to know the tendencies of the younger generation, take a trip through a toy department when it is busy and watch the children, then take another trip through when it is not busy and get the department manager to talk to you. But don't choose Christmas Eve.

In 1913 there was a marked development in the toy business in America. It may be said in passing that the United States toy market had, for several years, been demanding the highest grade of toys. By that is not meant the most expensive, but the most complete and practicable toys. "Practicable" used in the stage directions of a play means something that actually works, and not merely a dummy; the same meaning goes for toys.

Young America had steered steadily toward the practicable, and the practicable had taken the form of creative toys, in particular, construction sets and the like. Instructive toys are not far removed from the spirit of the nation, with its vast building operations. Next to the structural sets, came the electric motors, which would drive real miniature saws, hammers, pile-drivers and many other things. In fact, the electric toys came first, but because of their greater expense, appeared numerically smaller than the simpler construction sets. Then came the perennial train, from the electrically-propelled locomotive to the small tin affair; trains have been and remain a staple toy, and will continue to as long as we use locomotives; their fascination for the young, and even the not-so-young, is everlasting.

Very, very far down on the list came the familiar lead soldier, the toy fort, and the other paraphernalia of miniature warfare. Toy armaments had been out-paced by the constructive toys of peace.

On the other side of the store were the thousands of dolls which, come weal come woe, change not, except in degree of loveliness and nimbleness of joints. Dolls become more elaborate and of greater variety, but remain always dolls.

Of course express wagons, various forms of self-propelled wheel vehicles, and, for the very young, the clockwork novelties changed only with the widen-

ing inventiveness of the makers, and chiefly in shape and style.

The toy-buyers and sellers will tell you that the first year after war began brought them a very real difficulty, which was two-fold. Not only did they have to replace the toy-supplies which hitherto came in great abundance from Germany, but they had to meet a suddenly changed taste in toys. Furthermore, they had to meet an unprecedented demand, since the wave of early war-prosperity which swept the country put toys in greater abundance into American homes than ever before.

The story of how American ingenuity and enterprise met the first and, thereby, the second and third parts of this problem is one of the fascinating illustrations of this country's ability to care for itself if only the necessary impulse is given. It is the old proverb, "Necessity is the mother of invention," coming true again.

The history of the toy business is briefly told and is a necessary introduction to this most remarkable and innocent of America's war efforts.

The word, toy, comes from the Dutch *tuig*, which means tools, implements, or stuff, and *spelen*, to play, the compound *speltuig* meaning plaything (literally stuff to play with). Today the word toy means a child's plaything, and is extended to include worthless ornament, or a gee-gaw. Children's playthings are as old as man's time on this planet, and there are in existence even today stone and metal dolls with which the children of Egypt once played; probably the doll was the first, as it is the last, of nursery joys. Some of the earliest were of wood, and had movable joints. Toy animals, tops, rattles, balls and toy furniture also were common in early days.

Most of the early American toys, with some exceptions, were imported from several European countries until, in the late eighteenth century, Germany took the lead in the production in large quantity of small toys, gradually winning what was almost a monopoly in that industry. No one else ever has been able to compete with her doll-production at the price, and the same is true today—so much so that American buyers expect to be forced to get their dolls from Germany again, as American manufacturers declare competition with them is impossible.

The chief American-produced toys were of wood, wood being plentiful here when it had grown scarce in Germany, where metal had become the chief medium of manufacture.

The first Christmas of the Great War found the American stores well stocked with toys, but already the taste in toys had changed to a certain extent and, while the constructive toys managed to hold their place very well, there was a tremendous demand for toys which were not available except in small stocks and which always had come from Germany anyway. Germany was the home of the lead soldier and all his paraphernalia of war.

There was no industry organized to cope with this demand, nor was it possible to get a product in time for the 1914 Christmas market. It was obvious, however, that the demand would continue as long as the war lasted, and that as long as the war lasted, German supplies would not be obtained, because even if there were no war between Germany and the United States, and even if commercial relations between them were not hampered by the blockade, still German factories had to be turned over in the great war mobilization to more serious matters.

It was then that American ingenuity stepped in, and utilizing the medium that was most plentiful in

the shortest time, and which had already been used in restricted quantities for toy-making, there appeared one at a time the wooden toys which today are a major portion of the stock in trade of every toy-store.

Of these enterprises, three in particular proved immediately successful; one was in New York State, one in Illinois, and the third in the Pacific Northwest; the last-named owned many clever patents, and began an organized output of standard toys, trains, wheelbarrows, auto-go-cars, miniature billiard tables, and animals, all made of wood, and all made well to withstand the stern usage of childhood. At the same time wooden forts, wooden cannon, wooden guns, wooden automobiles, wooden armored cars appeared to satisfy the war-demand, and while these new toys proved more expensive than the tin toys of the previous years, their greater stability and the added strength of the wooden "joints" over the trifling metal ones, made them worth the money.

Between that long distant day and this, the toy-industry has made huge strides in America; and while the Japanese are today more than ever supplying the small, cheaply-constructed toys, America has produced in increasing quantities to meet an increasing demand for substantial, well-made toys, chiefly of wood but latterly some of stout metal which, ten years ago, would have seemed foolishly pretentious to offer anywhere except to the parents of the wealthy.

As the inventor associated with one of these first toy-factories said to the writer: "What a child wants is something to do with his hands; he wants a toy to work; that is why structural sets and other toys requiring some ingenuity in handling will come back stronger than ever just as soon as the war-toy passes out."

This has come true. For four years the factories strained every nerve to meet the fanciful demand of the American child for war-toys. Toy-making had to move with war-invention itself. Warships, guns, tanks, all had to appear in replica as soon as might be. Even today there is the aftermath in the most elaborate copies of the implements of war. Nevertheless the toys of peace are crowding them on the shelves in the stores, just as they are crowding them out of the benches of the factories.

Just as the war itself brought back the toys of war, so is the reconstruction period, with all its talk of building and industry, bringing back the useful toy which enables a child "to do something with his hands." It is perhaps worth noting carefully how the toy-demand reflects faithfully the thought and conversation of the adult world. If we talk in terms of industry, our children desire to copy our plans. If we talk and think of war, they wish to echo it. Perhaps there is in that thought the secret of America's toy-shops of the future. The toy-makers today say the factories must turn out for next Christmas—1920—the greatest series of constructive toys ever seen—derricks, bridges, dynamo-driven constructors, and novelties not yet revealed but already modeled in the factories.

The American boy is the most alert in the world. If we rebuild the world, he, in imitation, will rebuild it too—and so doing, will build a far finer and more permanent thing, his character.

Reversing the War

LONDON has seen the formation of a society of "Friends of the Latin Quarter," which plans to deter all British students from attending German universities.

The same day that London reported this, Vienna sent out word that the Austrian capital would make overtures as a candidate for the capital of the League of Nations.

We must expect to see many manifestations like these. Among the Allied Powers there will be more than one movement designed to keep the associated powers of democracy aloof from the old lands of autocratic rule. Among the former nations of the Central Alliance there will be other movements to hasten the restoration of amities, to accelerate the healing of all wounds.

Doubtless every proffer from Berlin or Vienna will in some way have a degree of counterbalance by some movement like that of the "Friends of the Latin Quarter."

Doubtless every action taken in Paris or London which lays emphasis on the old estrangement will be partly met by waving of new olive branches along the Danube or the Rhine.

Of course we know that nations not at war tend inevitably toward a more intimate peace. The great example of that has been the example of the United States and Great Britain. But it is probably just as well that the new rapprochement of the recently-hostile nations be accomplished slowly, deliberately, not in hasty forgetfulness.

In fact, no true understanding can be hastily reached. The nations thought they understood one another before the war—but the war showed them their blunder. They hesitate now, lest they enter into an "understanding" which is a mere continuation of their old misapprehensions.

In the old Hebrew story the Israelites came to the border of Palestine on their return from Egypt. They were seized with fear of the giants and did not enter the Promised Land. Therefore that generation wandered in the wilderness, and not until a new generation had taken their places did the Israelites conquer Canaan. So probably, now that the nations have turned aside in the wilderness of war, it may require a generation to forget all that has distressed us, so that we can all come again to the old borders of our common country, and enter with joy into the unity of the future.